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ABSTRACT

Mexico's recent history has been characterized by critical economic and political conditions that have eclipsed discussions of topics such as education. This paper views school principals as a key component of educational progress. If the current government's modernization policy included education, it would first be necessary to consider changes related to students and teachers. These two changes are difficult, costly, and politically sensitive. Principals, among the third category of changes, can be important catalysts for change, as research shows. Only a limited number of studies on school principals have been conducted in Mexico and other Latin American countries. In Mexico, principals are appointed using an obsolete ladder merit system that hinders consideration of administrative and leadership skills. This system is bureaucratic and seniority-driven, as shown in a recent Mexicali study. The same investigation revealed that principals delegated heavy workloads to assistant principals and that women secondary school administrators were practically nonexistent. A major problem is lack of a mechanism for organizing information and disseminating it to the professional public. A research agenda is proposed that focuses on (1) information gathering and dissemination (through ERIC); (2) ideal principal profiles; (3) diagnosis of principals' differences; (4) cultural and organizational change; (5) the role of professional organizations; and (6) professional preparation alternatives. (38 references) (MLH)

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SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN MEXICO:

A Research Agenda

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SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN MEXICO:
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ABSTRACT

The role of the school principal is vital to educational change. However, in Mexico there is limited information available to help one better understand the work of school principals, and how their role and influence can be expanded or modified. Consequently, there is not any information available to assist in organizing or designing educational administration development programs.

The first part of this study provides arguments stressing the importance of school principals and how they represent a key component of educational progress.

The second section reviews some of the most outstanding works relating to school principals in the United States and various other countries.

The last part suggests a research agenda composed of the following six points: 1) information, 2) profiles, 3) diagnosis, 4) change, 5) professional organizations, and 6) professional preparation. These lines of research will help in obtaining information about school principals in Mexico in order to support necessary changes, particularly in the preparation of future school principals.

SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN MEXICO: A Research Agenda

The last several years of Mexico's history has been characterized by critical conditions affecting its population. Economic and political issues have eclipsed discussion of other topics such as education.

To accept the limitations of Mexico's current educational system is to be realistic. The National Development Plan (1983) presents a chronicle of the issues in need of urgent attention in the Mexican educational system. The long list of problems to be solved can be prioritized. In attempting to address these issues, however, Mexican educational policy can fall into a trap. Items that appear on the surface to be less important receive only marginal, if any, attention. Such is the case of school principals.

This study deals with school principals in Mexico as a strategic way to facilitate the modernization of education in Mexico.

The Importance of School Principals

If the policy of modernization of the current government included education, it would be necessary to consider, in more general terms, changes related to the students, and changes related to teachers. All other changes are of secondary importance. However, the first two changes mentioned are very difficult, costly, and sensitive because of the political bonds that need be broken to bring about said changes. Among the third category of changes, the attention to school principals as a catalyst for change in schools appears as one of the most important elements.

Regardless of the amount of influence school principals exert on their respective schools, it is obvious that they all concentrate a certain measure of authority, that, in terms of power makes them key elements in all educational organizations. This relevance has been very well documented in the United States (Barth, 1976; Blumberg & Greenfield, 1980; Northwest Regional Education Lab., 1987; Robinson & Bock, 1982.)

The role played by school principals in educational change has also been abundantly discussed in the United States (Armstrong, 1988; Aquila, 1988; Hubbard, 1968; Justiz, 1985; Hord et al., 1984; Sarason, 1971). However, the role of school principals in Mexico has received limited attention and does not seem to impact education in Mexico.

United States

In the United States, an abundance of literature relating to this subject has been produced. Conducting a search in ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center), using the topic principals, more than 4700 papers were found to have been written between the years 1966 and 1989. Presently, more than 200 papers are written on the subject each year, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Papers in ERIC using School Principals as main topic

Year	No. of works	Average number of papers per year
1966-1975	1138	126.4
1976-1982	1722	246.0
1983-1989*	1872	267.4
TOTAL	**4732**	**205.7**

*May 1989

Using the same database, twenty percent of the above papers were randomly selected for analysis in order to identify any trend in the specific topics discussed. The results reveal a trend of studies trying to discover the relationship between efficient schools and principals. This is very probably based on the western tradition, that compares the school principal with the business manager who is regarded as a powerful leader able to influence greatly his or her organization.

The many hypotheses that have been employed in this line of research can be synthesized as follows: The school principal is for the most part responsible for a school's efficiency, thus once you identify the characteristics of an efficient school's principal, you will have obtained the profile of an ideal principal. Principals with these characteristics will make schools efficient.

However, the results obtained by following this venue have been contradictory. For example, research conducted by Peterson (1978), Pitner (1982), and Sproul (1979) shows that a principal's work has little effect on student learning. These findings have been challenged by many others where principals make an essential difference in student learning (Armor et al., 1976; Brookover & Lezotte, 1977; Edmonds, 1979).

In addressing these discrepancies, Dwyer, Lee, Barnett, Filby and Rowan (1985) affirm that all the studies diminishing or not recognizing the importance of school principals in students' learning contain serious methodological or conceptual errors. In their excellent one-year study, they combine qualitative and quantitative

methods. In addition, they consider the various components that influence schools, e.g., teachers, students, and parents, they found out that they not only influence their schools, but their work determines students' learning depending on "...the skill to link activities to a high priority of the school and the students." (Dwyer, Lee, Barnett, Filby & Rowan, 1985, p.29).

Even when the debate concerning the role of the school principal has not been settled, during the eighties there commenced a trend of studies relating school principals to excellence, perhaps partly influenced by the business administration world. The most notable propounder of this theory was Peters (1983). Part of this trend is the current research which focuses on school principals and their capacity to influence organizational cultures. This deals primarily with the ability of school principals to change the culture of a given school (Navarro, 1986; Peterson, 1988; Sashkin, 1988).

Other Countries

Though there was no opportunity to access databanks that may exist in other countries, using the same ERIC database of the United States, between 1976 and May 1989, 69 studies were identified as relating to the topics of principals- not comparative-education and foreign countries. These works all relate to school principals of foreign countries. In this category, the studies that dealt with school principals in a comparative context were excluded. It is interesting to discover which countries, aside from the United States, have contributed most in the topic of school principals in the above-mentioned database. Table 2 presents these countries with the corresponding number of studies.

Table 2

Number of studies by country reported in ERIC between 1976 and May 1989

Country	**No. of studies**
Canada	33
Australia	15
Great Britain	5
West Germany	3
Lebanon	3
Sweden	2
Israel	2
Northern Ireland	2
Liberia	1
New Zealand	1
Nigeria	1
Sri Lanka	1
Total	**69**

The first observable fact that can be detected from the above table is that countries whose language is English have contributed the greatest number of studies, mainly Canada, followed by Australia. Despite this, other non-English-speaking countries have contributed works, though these are in English.

In the comparative context, when crossing the terms principals- and comparative-studies, the same database has catalogued the works of 15 countries, where the topic of school principals in other nations is studied in a comparative context with respect to school principals in the United States. Table 3 shows the number of works by country, the main topic being dealt with, and the authors:

Table 3

Studies dealing with the topic of School Principals/Comparative Studies by Country, Topic and Author.

Country	Topic	Year	Author
Great Britain	Role	72	Fromberg
Great Britain	Role	74	Rogers
Great Britain	Culture	72	Heyman
Great Britain	Role	82	Packer
Great Britain	Comparative	76	Clark
Great Britain	Comparative	88	Floyd & Floyd
Nigeria	Role	80	CCEA*
Nigeria	Role	81	Sarat
Saudi Arabia	Role	80	CCEA*
Australia	Role	85	Brady
Cyprus	Role	80	CCEA*
Finland	Comparative	84	Leino
Greece	Role	does not show	Amsdent
India	Role	80	CCEA*
Ireland	Curriculum	84	McKernan
Israel	Role	does not show	Amsdent
Japan	Comparative	87	Bartell, et.al
Pakistan	Role	81	Sarat
Sudan	Role	81	Sarat
Turkey	Unions	does not show	Amsdent
Eastern Caribbean	Role	80	CCEA*

* Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration

† Same study

In the category of role we have included all the studies that had as their main objective to discover or better understand the role that school principals play in their respective schools. A more specific analysis revealed that these studies generally referred to: the influence of internal factors on the behavior of school principals; administrative practices, and the possibility of changing them through school principals; the leadership behavior of school principals; the reaction of school principals to teachers' unions; the school principal as an agent of change; school principals' support for teachers; and the role of school principals in the future.

Several of these studies merit special discussion. The study performed by Leino (1984) offers comprehensive research on school principals in Finland. He studied 87 school principals to determine their personality profiles in terms of their cognitive processes and styles of leadership. He also studied the normative and personal role of school principals, their preference of teaching methods, the subject they had taught, styles, values and attitudes, and response to criticism.

The activities of the Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration (CCEA) are noteworthy because of the 4th Congress organized in 1980 in Cyprus with the topic: "The Administration of the Schools of the Future: Focusing in the School Principal," that produced four studies related to the topic of school principals (CCEA, 1980). The strategy of holding international conferences permits an ideal environment to study educational administration topics from a comparative perspective. Research papers were presented on: models of change; barriers to change; change strategies; and the principal's role in change.

In summary, the search and analysis of school principals and comparative studies from 1972 to 1989, using ERIC displays works of 15 countries with Great Britain having the larger number of works (6). The favorite topic is the role performed by school principals (14). Only in one country, Finland was a major research undertaken to determine the personality profile of school principals. And, only one international association, the Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration (CCEA), seemed to be interested in the relationship between school principals and educational change.

Mexico

The ERIC database did not produce any studies, in English or Spanish, when crossing the terms school principals and and [Mexico- or Latin-America-1)

Only a limited number of studies were located that have been conducted in Mexico and other Latin American countries on the topic of school principals. The study conducted by Ortega (1985) "The Profile of Technical School Principal in Mexico." This study was conducted between 1982 and 1984, and presents the characteristics, e.g., sex, age, education level, and other information about school principals, assistant school principals, presidents and vice-presidents of technical schools and public technological institutes. Questionnaires requesting specific information and experiences were used. Information was also requested about certain administrative practices in order to assess the values and judgement of the administrators about their roles, e.g., which is the most rewarding task from your administrative duties?, the most negative?; which are the greatest challenges in your job?; and additional comments.

The study concluded that women are not proportionately represented among school principals and presidents; to be an engineer is an indispensable requisite to be a principal or president in this kind of institutions; almost all of the principals and presidents participating in this study have not had any formal contact with private educational institutions or the private sector. On the other hand, the public institutions that have influenced them the most are the Technological Institutes and the National Polytechnical Institute; the main concerns of school principals and presidents was personnel management. Finally, school principals and presidents expressed the need for the training and development in educational administration to be conducted more: "...regularly,... systematically,... [and] with a larger coverage," (Ortega, 1985: p.181).

In Mexico, it is generally accepted that public school principals are appointed on the basis of a ladder merit system that is so obsolete, that it is almost impossible to consider administrative and leadership skills. The ladder merit system functions in a bureaucratic way which favors those applicants with the greatest seniority and those who follow the bureaucratic procedure with the most detail. In a recent study conducted in Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico among secondary school principals, evidence supported the findings that a principals most important qualification was that they worked as teachers between 16 and 30 years. Consequently, their experience in administration was limited to an average of less than 10 years (Cuellar, 1989).

The same investigation revealed that school principals assign a heavy workload to assistant school principals. This tendency reached so great a proportion in some cases that assistant principals were the ones who really were administering the schools. Some school principals do not even haven regular attendance at their assigned schools.

Another finding was the low representation of women in secondary school administration despite the high proportion of female teachers. From a set of 128 schools that included federal, state, and private schools, a stratified sample of 23 schools (11 federal, 9 state, and 3 private) was taken, whose principals would be the subjects of study. Only three women held the position of school principal. Two of the three women were principals of private secondary schools.

In conclusion, the most notable area in the topic of school principals in Mexico is the lack of a mechanism for systemizing information in order to make it accessible to the professional public. Based on the two studies analyzed, and with the limitations that this implies, one can say that there exists a gap between the principals of technical schools and the principals of federal and state secondary schools. The former group is largely made up of engineers, while the latter group is composed of teachers. For the second group, a merit ladder system, that functions almost exclusively with bureaucratic criteria, is used for professional advancement. Under this system the most important factor becomes seniority, and little or no consideration is given to administrative skills or professional adequacy. For the former group, the engineers, political factors and professional affiliation (e.g., alumni of the National Polytechnical Institute, or of the Technological Institutes) are the main criteria. Both studies note that there is limited representation of women in

the position of school principals, vice-principals, presidents or vice-presidents. One of the studies concluded that vice principals were assigned the bulk of administrative burden and, in some cases, the totality of the administrative task, due to repeated absences on the part of the official principals.

Research Agenda concerning School Principals in Mexico

Assuming that change in education is inevitable, guiding and controlling the change should be a goal of educational policy in any organization. Taking into account the role of school principals, it would be beneficial to define the profile of an ideal school principal who will generate desired changes. Therefore, it is necessary to identify and create programs that select and prepare ideal principals. In addition to selecting the best strategies for empowering those already in service by bringing them closer to the already determined ideal profile.

1.Information. The first goal of the research agenda should be to assemble a bibliography relating to school principals in Mexico that can be used to find, analyze, and utilize already existing information. With this first step and while assembling a national collection concerning the topic, it is imperative to have the participation of researchers and translators in order to identify an international bibliography that will integrate and translate the best studies related to the topic of school principals.

According to Ted Brandhorst, director of processing and references for ERIC (1989), the database has not established a policy encouraging the sending of studies in other languages beside English. However, the very same policy does not exclude studies in other languages. In a telephone interview, he commented that the most important criteria for electing studies for inclusion into ERIC is the relevance of the particular paper to the scientific community. When papers are written in a language other than English, a large number of users are limited to the degree that they cannot even judge relevance. He suggested that a summary of roughly 1500 words in English represents a partial solution. The ideal solution would be a complete translation of the paper. He added that research papers presented at in national or international conferences hold especial interest and would have a better chance of acceptance in ERIC.

Taking this into account, one alternative worthy of consideration is to begin to send copies of papers, technical reports, research, and other documents to the ERIC database with their respective summaries in English. This option is more convenient for Mexicans and Latin-Americans than having to translate the entire document. Following Brandhordst's recommendations, it would be advantageous to organize an annual conference on school principals and to select the best papers presented in order to send them to the ERIC database along with their respective translations. ERIC is very popular in Mexico and would partially solve the need for an information center.

2. Profiles. The next step would be to research the characteristics that new principals should have. This line of research should include studies of similar situations in other countries. These papers would point in the direction to move in and would begin to demonstrate, in general terms, the ideal profile of future school principals in Mexico.

3. Diagnosis. It is important, then, to conduct research to find out what school principals in Mexico are like as compared to the ideal. With a more specialized perspective, it would be convenient to discover differences between school principals of different levels and types of schools. If these differences were found to exist, as it happens in other countries, research could then ascertain what causes these differences. Research could also investigate whether or not there are differences by state or region. In general terms, quantitative research that yields information on school principals is necessary. In this order of ideas, another important line of research should concentrate on identifying deficiencies that come with utilizing the ladder system to name school principals, in addition to discovering, and evaluating other influences that surely intervene in the process of selecting school principals for schools.

4. Change. Considering the urgency that presently exists in bringing about educational change, as well as the advances that have been made in the field, it is advisable to develop a line of research related to school principals and educational change that uses the theories and information that is offered by studies on culture and organizational change.

5. Professional Organizations. Professional organizations in other countries are one of the most important mechanisms for the interchange of information, professional encouragement, and professional development. In Mexico these kinds of organizations, within education, have not been visible. It would be highly beneficial if research would analyze and evaluate both formal and informal associations and groups to which school principals belong. For this research, historical and ethnographic methods offer great potential.

6. Professional Preparation. The most urgent research needed with respect to school principals is that which deals with a school principals professional preparation. It is important to have alternatives that consider the contributions of other countries with respect to the programs for the preparation of school principals. It is also desirable to offer regional alternatives for the certification of school principals. Programs of continuous education are needed for school principals already in service. Research is needed that will ascertain the sources of professional information that school principals have.

The way to meet this agenda is not immediately apparent nor easy to identify. However, we know what direction to follow and what tools to use. It should not be postponed any longer.

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